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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the planning of a pilot developmental kindergarten program for a school district that traditionally emphasized an academic kindergarten program. Background information is presented which explains the reasons for initiating the change. Steps taken to plan the program are explained, and a list of possible impediments to planning such a program is presented. (Author/PCB)

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ABSTRACT

Title: Planning a Developmental Kindergarten Program: A Case Study

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Intended for school personnel, this paper reports the planning of a pilot developmental kindergarten program for a school district that traditionally emphasized an academic kindergarten program. Noting the recent concern for the concentration of academics (skills and achievement) of most kindergarten programs, the paper provides background information on the environment in which the developmental kindergarten program was planned, detailed steps that were taken to plan the program, and concludes with impediments to planning such a program.

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REPORT

PLANNING A DEVELOPMENTAL KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY

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PLANNING A DEVELOPMENTAL KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY

Introduction

Kindergarten is no longer considered a preschool experience for young children. A survey conducted by the Educational Research Service reveals that of the 1,228 principals who responded 85% indicate that the primary focus of their kindergarten program is academics (skills and achievement). Ironically, the majority of the present kindergarten programs emphasize abstract, symbolic experiences for an age group who learns best through concrete, hands-on experiences.

Concentration on the intellectual characteristic of young children is evident of the lack of attention given to the need to integrate their social, emotional, physical, and intellectual characteristics. Gradually, however, educators are realizing that school experiences and preschool experiences do not serve the same purposes; in turn, they should not resemble each other. Recent articles by Cheever and Ryder (1986), Elkind (1986), and Egerston (1987) attempt to show us the error of our ways. Some school districts are undertaking efforts to correct the error and return to the purpose for which kindergarten was intended.

In Duval County, Florida the dysfunction between the system's kindergarten curricular expectations and child development expectations were recognized by the staff at one elementary school. In this paper the planning of a pilot Developmental Kindergarten Program at Mayport Elementary School is discussed. The topics presented are: 1) background

information on the environment for which the program planning occurred; 2) the steps that were taken to plan the program; and 3) impediments to planning the program.

Background on the Environment

District Level

At the direction of the superintendent, a three year district wide study was conducted to determine the possible causes of the differences between black and white students' standardized achievement test scores. The three most significant findings of that study are that the difference is more a function of economic status rather than race, that the skill areas with the greatest deficit are auditory perception and language development, and that the deficits are apparent at the beginning of kindergarten.

Next, the system's curriculum and skill objectives were reviewed to determine: 1) if gaps existed in the skill development hierarchy; and 2) if the appropriate skills and instructional methods were being employed. Kindergarten was reviewed first because the deficit was apparent at the beginning of that grade.

It was concluded that for kindergarten the system's curriculum emphasized abstract concepts and symbols, and encouraged paper and pencil tasks as the primary means of evaluation. In addition, the Instructional Management System objectives did not include specific auditory and visual tasks which are essential prerequisites to the County's readiness

skills children are expected to master. In other words, the social, physical, emotional, and intellectual development of the child were not addressed in an integrated fashion. The stage was set for some type of adjustment to occur in the kindergarten program. Mayport Elementary School took the initiative by piloting the Developmental Kindergarten Program.

School Level

Mayport's program includes kindergarten through fifth grade. The socioeconomic status of the school is low to middle income with over 50% of the students on free or reduced lunch. Over 60% of the students are from Navy families causing one parent to frequently be absent. Mayport's population is highly mobile, with approximately a 67% student turnover each year. The enrollment is approximately 970 and the percent of student attendance by race is 77% white, 15% black, 2% Hispanic, and 6% Asian/Pacific Islanders. The professional staff includes 38 classroom teachers, a reading resource teacher, three exceptional child teachers, a media specialist, a music teacher, an art teacher, a physical education teacher, a primary resource teacher, four full-time and one part-time Chapter I reading teachers, and a guidance counselor. The support staff includes a media clerk, 15 teacher aides, and a Chapter I aide. Although the elementary school may seem unique because it services children whose families are affiliated with the Navy, the school's turnover rate, criterion referenced and normed test scores, staff distribution, and rate of retention are similar to other schools in Duval County with comparable socioeconomic

status.

In the fall of 1985, the principal, Primary Resource Teacher, and kindergarten teachers met to review and assess five years of their kindergarten data. They found that each year a high number of kindergarten students were being screened and placed in the Exceptional Student Education program (30%), a high number of students were identified by the Santa Clara assessment test as having deficits in auditory perception (50%) and language development (50%), a high number of students were retained for the first time at the kindergarten level (25%), a high percentage of those retained at kindergarten were multiple retainees by the time they were promoted to second grade (40%), children were required to perform paper and pencil tasks for which they were not ready, children had a high level of frustration, teachers' expectations and children's performance were not equal, and the County's Instructional Management System objectives did not contain all the essential developmental areas that should be addressed in kindergarten. After comparing their findings with the County's kindergarten curriculum they concluded that the current curriculum did not meet the needs of the children who Mayport serves.

Steps to Planning a Developmental Kindergarten Program

School staff planning an effective developmental kindergarten program which is appropriate for the population they serve is dependent upon the support of the principal. The principal is the key advocate of transforming the curriculum.

He/She can provide information on the constraints that will be placed on the planning, the district level administrators who will need to be involved, and the policies of the system. At Mayport the principal was visible and actively involved in each planning step.

This section contains the steps that were taken by the Mayport staff to transform an abstract, symbolic kindergarten curriculum into a concrete, hands-on one. Depending on the situation for which the program is being planned some steps may be omitted and others may need to be added.

Step 1. The principal and teachers conduct a longitudinal review of the student data. Data are assessed to identify deficit areas in kindergarten and in the subsequent grades to determine if a pattern exists across grade levels in the deficit areas. Examination is made of test scores, retention rates, areas of remediation, and referral for special programs, to name a few.

Mayport staff reviewed five years of student data. They found the principal deficit areas to be auditory perception and language development.

Step 2. Teachers brainstorm on what they perceive to be the problem skills and instructional areas. The brainstorming sessions have several benefits: 1) clarifying kindergarten goals and objectives begins, 2) creating a sense of team spirit, and 3) encouraging open discussion on beliefs and perceptions.

The concerns identified by the school staff were: gaps in the prerequisites of several skill areas, emphasis on worksheets

as the predominant instructional materials, and teacher-centered instruction was the major instructional style.

Step 3. The staff reviews research, observes alternative programs and attends early childhood education conferences. The purpose of this step is to get a sense of how others handle similar concerns, some of the resource people in the field, what is involved in a transition from an academic kindergarten program (skill and achievement) to a developmental program (child development).

Mayport's staff attended the conferences of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Florida Association for Children Under Six. They observed in three Florida school districts , one of which has developmental kindergarten and first grade in all of its schools.

Step 4. The appropriate district level administrator is presented with the idea of a developmental kindergarten program.

In this case, the district level administrator was the Assistant Superintendent of Instruction. A report was presented to him by the principal. The report contained the results of reviewing the school's student data, a brief review of literature on child development, the expected outcomes of implementing a developmental kindergarten program, a timeline, a proposed budget, and methods of evaluation. It was also possible to establish a connection between Mayport's findings and the findings from the three year district wide study that was of interest to him. Through this presentation it was determined that the developmental curriculum would have to encompass the

present Instructional Management System objectives and remain consistent with the Duval County Pupil Progression Plan. Essentially, the skills would not change but the manner in which the skills were presented would change.

Step 5. The teachers and principal meet to identify possible obstacles. Knowing the obstacles that will possibly be confronted aids in obtaining the proper resources.

Some of the obstacles that were identified at Mayport included: 1) How to start the change?; 2) How to get teachers in other grades to accept the change?; 3) How to get aides to change their behaviors?; 4) How to get parents to understand the change?; 5) How to make teachers, particularly the kindergarten teachers, more cognizant of child development theory?; and 6) How to match learners to appropriate materials?

Step 6. Resources are identified and guidelines for the use of the resources are established.

To overcome the obstacles that were generated in Step 5 consultants in early childhood education were obtained from local post-secondary institutions. The consultants provided three services. First, they observed the kindergarten teachers' behaviors and teaching styles, and the teachers' and aides' interaction with each other and the students. The observations were summarized and suggestions were provided on changes that the teachers and aides would need to make to operate in a developmental classroom environment.

Second, consultants provided training in Gesell child development philosophy. This training provided teachers with

background on the need of children, manifestations of those needs, and ways to meet the needs. First grade teacher also received this training to allay their concern that the students would not be "ready" for first grade and to prepare them for planning a first grade developmental program. Third, the consultants assisted teachers in identifying manipulative and other appropriate instructional materials to match the system's kindergarten curriculum objectives.

Step 7. Meetings are held frequently. The purposes of the meetings are for problem solving, modifying plans, and addressing other concerns.

The staff held meetings twice a week. On Tuesdays, the teachers met to work on restating Mayport's kindergarten philosophy, goals, and objectives, as well as analyzing developmental skills. On Thursdays, they discussed ways to address parents' concerns, evaluate student progress, physical arrangements, and styles of management, to name a few. Additional meetings were held to develop and construct instructional materials, and plan and prepare for the aides' training sessions.

Step 8. Aides are provided training in areas that will enable them to successfull fulfill their roles as instructional assistants.

The aides received 20 hours of instruction which was conducted by the kindergarten teachers and university personnel. Their training included background information on the developmental philosophy, techniques for questioning children,

interacting with parents, giving children directions, and understanding the objectives of learning activities (i.e., to develop auditory memory, to reinforce a language skill).

Step 9. Produce a document as the culminating activity. The format should be one that is useful to those who use it.

A developmental kindergarten activity based curriculum guide was produced as the culminating planning activity. The topics contained in the curriculum guide are: philosophy, goals and objectives of the developmental kindergarten program, screening, placement, scheduling, room arrangements and floor plans, anticipated outcomes, and twelve skill areas.

Skill areas consist of visual perception, language development, fine motor, mathematics, auditory perception, reading readiness, gross motor, science and health, social studies, self concept and music. Each skill area has goals and objectives which are based on child development information obtained from the training and other research sources. The objectives are written to allow for appropriate developmental expectations, and skill progression and mastery.

The resulting format for each skill area is presented below:

I. Introductory Paragraph

II. Goals

III. Objectives

IV. Skills Checklist

V. Examples of Activities on Three Developmental Levels

A. Very concrete

B. Concrete

C. Semi-Abstract

Impediments to Planning

A plan serves as a management tool that involves the interaction among the attributes of the new program itself, the environment in which the new program will operate, and the characteristics of the potential users. Overlooking the obvious can cause impediments to planning.

1. Without the support and commitment of principals to a developmental kindergarten program the planning effort can be blocked. Their support and commitment will primarily be determined by the level of their engagement in the planning process.

2. Planning which is rushed can be ineffective. Allow enough time to gather and analyze data, identify resources and constraints, become aware of the attitudes, values, and norms of the potential users, and obtain the training in child development theory.

3. Plans which are made without a decision on the expected outcomes lead to dead ends. Decide early in the planning process what are the desired outcomes of the developmental kindergarten program for the setting.

4. Staff members who are not involved in the planning are often concerned about the impact the developmental kindergarten program will have on them. Ignoring their concerns only creates problems. Find ways to keep them informed.

5. Inservice in child development theory is mandatory. Child development philosophy is very different from the present

academic focus of kindergarten.

In summary, there is a renewed interest nationally in the importance of aligning present kindergarten curricular expectations with child development theory. High quality, effective early childhood programs can only occur when internal factors and local decisions which influence the programs are identified and assessed so that program planners are able to outline appropriate strategies for their setting.

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